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SUBJECT: TURKEY: USG APPROVAL RATINGS STILL IN BASEMENT;
PRESIDENT OBAMA THE EXCEPTION

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Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey for 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Based on the latest PEW survey (but broadly consistent with other polls we have seen recently) USG approval ratings in Turkey continue to lag, although there are glimmers of improvement in certain categories such as confidence that the US will do the right thing in international affairs (33 percent versus 2 percent last year). Some 18 percent of Turks see the U.S. as a partner (versus 8 percent last year) while 40 percent see America as an enemy (down from 70 percent last year). Still, the USG's overall rating of 14 percent (below China's 16 percent) has barely shifted from last year's 12 percent, and suggests that the Turkish public remains deeply scarred by the Iraq war and its aftermath. The deep schisms in Turkey's internal political landscape are also problematic in that the US is often reflexively blamed by all sides (Ergenekon). INR/R polling has demonstrated the effectiveness of exchange programs in that respondents with first-hand experience of the U.S. are able to differentiate between their views of U.S. policies they disagree with, the U.S. in general and Americans. Such differentiation does not take place with Turks who do not have firsthand U.S. experience or who know someone who has. Exchange programs remain a high mission priority. In addition, emphasizing our enduring partnership with Turkey, our commitment to treating Turkey with respect, and our willingness to listen to Turkish views is something that we will continue to do in word and deed. END SUMMARY.

Pew,s 2009 Survey Results

12. (U) The Pew Research Center's 2009 twenty-five nation Global Attitudes Survey showed little change from last year in Turks' opinion of the U.S. and Americans, with favorable ratings of 14 percent for both in 2009 compared to 12 percent for the former and 13 percent for the latter in 2008. On other topics, Turkish opinion while still negative improved significantly. For example, 33 percent expressed confidence that the U.S. will do the right thing in international affairs in 2009 compared to 2 percent in 2008. Some 18 percent see the U.S. as a partner and 40 percent as an enemy this year compared to 8 percent and 70 percent respectively in 2008. Twenty four percent favor U.S. efforts to fight terrorism now compared to 9 percent when this question was last asked in 2007. Thirty three percent of Turks expressed confidence in President Obama compared to 2 percent for President Bush in the 2008 poll.

Explaining the Numbers

13. (SBU) The 14 percent favorable rating for the U.S. among Turks needs to be put in context, both globally and

domestically. The 2009 Global Attitudes Survey measured attitudes towards China, Russia and the EU. Turkish attitudes towards them are comparable to the U.S. favorability rating: 16 percent favorable for China; 13 percent favorable for Russia; and 22 percent favorable for the EU. Turkish popular wisdom has it that the "only friend of a Turk is a Turk" and this seems to be borne out by polling here. In a March 2009 poll, the reputable Turkish polling company Infakto asked respondents to identify Turkey's best friend in the world. "None" came in first at 33 percent, followed by Azerbaijan at 5 percent and the U.S. at 4 percent. This is not a public that seems to trust the intentions of other actors on the international scene. The Turkish educational system deserves much blame for this. The primary and secondary school curriculum is Turkey-centric and the formation of the republic narrative highly critical (to be fair, justifiably to a large degree) of the efforts of the great powers and neighbors to reduce Turkey's territory to a fraction of its current size upon the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Sabanci University political scientist Ali Carkoglu argued to us that it would be surprising were any graduate of a Turkish school to express a positive view of the U.S. or any Western power given the aggressiveness with which republican ideology is promoted and its antipathy to the West. As he put it, an ill-educated Turk is far more likely to be positively disposed to the U.S.

14. (SBU) There's more to our low approval ratings, of course, than just Turks' less-than-embracing attitude towards other countries. Focus groups conducted by INR and R/RPR over the last several months reinforce earlier findings in identifying the perceived tone of U.S. interaction with

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Turkey and reliance on military force in addressing problems as key factors driving Turks' overall negative image of the U.S. R/RPR's late April focus groups in Istanbul and Ankara produced a variety of assertions like these:

-- "What I see between the U.S. and Turkey is that the U.S. is on a higher level than Turkey." "The U.S. dictates (to) Turkey about which way the relations will be led";

-- "Actually there is an inherent problem with the power they (the USG) hold. When you talk to the Americans, they don't listen to get (convinced) by you. They don't listen to you to be persuaded by you. I am talking about the policymakers."

"In the light of what they hear from you, they (make) calculations how to make you fit into what they want to happen";

-- "I do not know about the import-export figures, but when I look at the relations between the U.S. and Turkey, the relations are based on military power."

U.S. Policies

15. (C) Particularly post-cold war, many Turks forget what America has done for the country's independence and security, and focus on a long litany of American policy moves, insults, and slights, known seemingly by heart by every Turk: pulling the Jupiter missiles in 1962; the 1964 "Johnson letter" questioning NATO article V were Turkey to provoke Russia by invading Cyprus; the post-1974 arms embargo; our policy over decades regarding Saddam's Iraq (seen by the Turks as only "an enemy of their enemy": the Kurds); and what they see as a persistent tilt to Cyprus and Greece due to raw domestic U.S. considerations. On this front, the most egregious issue that keeps emotions boiling over is our seemingly almost annual debate over whether to use "genocide" in describing the events of 1915.

16. (SBU) If these enduring perceptions about the nature and tone of U.S.-Turkish relations are major contributors to Turks' low approval of the U.S., similarly low approval of Americans seems to be driven largely by lack of direct

contact with Americans. As Guclu Atilgan of Infakto pointed out, the vast majority of Turks participating in surveys have had no direct contact with Americans. Their impressions of Americans are formed by movies and television, and Turks' approval of American popular culture is extremely low. In a just released INR/R survey, for example, only 28 percent of Turks expressed a positive opinion of American movies.

¶17. (SBU) Turkish approval ratings for the U.S. and Americans in the just-released INR/R survey are higher than the Pew poll numbers at 22 percent for the U.S. and 24 percent for Americans. TNS PIAR conducted the Turkey surveys for both Pew and INR/R. TNS PIAR pollster Zeynep Buyukazici attributes the higher numbers for the INR/R poll, which was conducted at the beginning of May, to a spike in Turkish opinion of the U.S. in response to President Obama's visit. The Pew polling was done a month later. According to Buyukazici, such a dissipation of the effects of positive messages over the course of a month is not unusual.

¶18. (SBU) President Obama's high ratings relative to the U.S. and Americans would appear to be attributable at least in part to the fact that he comes to the Turkish public with a clean slate, without the baggage described above that weighs down perceptions of the U.S. and Americans. An Infakto February poll revealed that half of Turks (52 percent) have a favorable opinion of the president and 39 percent have confidence in him. INR/R focus groups conducted in Istanbul in January saw participants describe the President as "a good man," "sympathetic," and inclined to "solve problems through diplomacy."

Implications for the Mission's Response?

¶19. (SBU) A quick fix for low approval ratings for the U.S. and Americans isn't in the cards, though recent fluctuations in attitudes demonstrate that progress can be made. Over the ten-year history of Pew's measurement of Turkish attitudes towards the U.S., favorable ratings began at 52 percent, then fell to 30 percent in 2002, fell further to 15 percent in 2003, before rising again to 30 percent in 2004. Emphasizing our enduring partnership with Turkey, our commitment to treating Turkey with respect, and our willingness to listen to Turkish views is something that we will continue to do in word and deed.

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¶10. (SBU) The persistently low approval ratings for Americans are a problem that we are addressing with support from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). We increased our Fulbright Commission allocation by \$1 million this year via matching USG and GOT contributions of \$500,000. This 25 percent increase in the Commission's budget will allow a significant increase in the number of Turkish students going to the U.S. and American students coming to Turkey. ECA also funded a \$750,000 exchange initiative -- "Young America/Young Turkey: A New Relationship for a New Age" -- that is supporting three two-way exchange programs targeting emerging political and NGO leaders. We've invested an additional \$250,000 in English teaching. As the Pew poll demonstrates, there's an obvious need for more exchange and English teaching programs to address low Turkish approval of the U.S. and Americans. INR/R polling has demonstrated the effectiveness of exchange programs in that respondents with first-hand experience of the U.S. are able to differentiate between their views of U.S. policies they disagree with, the U.S. in general and Americans. They rate the U.S. and Americans higher than the policies with which they disagree. Such differentiation doesn't take place with Turks who don't have firsthand U.S. experience or know someone who has. In that light, we should be encouraged that visa demand is surging despite poor economic conditions (Istanbul is the third busiest visa

issuing post in Europe after London and Moscow).

¶11. (C) It is also worth noting that amid the significant stress fractures of Turkey's current political landscape, the USG is routinely blamed by all sides. Many secularists are convinced that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is the creation of the USG, and that Washington bolsters and funds the Fethullah Gulen movement. Core AKP supporters question why the USG did not object more vigorously to last year's closure case against the ruling party. AKP critics complain that the USG has not been more vocal against the prosecutor's tough tactics in the Ergenekon investigation. Nationalists accuse the U.S. of launching and sustaining the Kurdish insurgency, the PKK, as part of a diabolical plot to create an independent Kurdistan. (COMMENT: Few Turks are aware of how effective the USG's provision of real-time intelligence to the Turkish military has been in the counter-insurgency effort in northern Iraq. Because we have deliberately kept a low profile on that initiative, the USG gets no public credit for this major success. END COMMENT) In addition, as one analyst has pointed out, the AKP often appears reticent in public about its close ties to the USG, possibly out of concern that such sentiment would not play well with its segment of the electorate. Such distancing does not lend itself to improved US ratings, when the enduring image for much of the public is the Iraq war and its aftermath. Such distancing is not limited to the AKP. Sabanci University's Ali Carkoglu argues that Turkish elites generally are loath to be perceived as too close to the U.S., and this applies to the Turkish military as much as any other group. Political calculation is an element of this, of course, but Carkoglu also stressed the power of republican indoctrination in the schools, which encourages the belief that the U.S. and other major international players are powerful and interested only in pursuing their own interests in their dealings with Turkey.

Does It Matter?

¶12. (C) The short answer is, yes. To the extent that we have a "vision" for how a Middle Eastern majority Islamic population state should "look," Turkey, with a basically democratic system and tradition, fairly strong rule of law, powerhouse modern industrial and financial sectors, and close political, historical, and security links with the West, meets it better than any other state. Scoring so low -- these days even compared to the traditionally hostile Arab world in some polls -- both hurts our amour propre, and hurts our bilateral cooperation. "Going along" with US-endorsed initiatives, be it reopening of the Halki seminary, or outreach to Kurds, is a "negative" in the domestic political calculus, and thus initiatives we support suffer from yet another disadvantage. On the other hand, Turkey, even more than most democracies, turns over much of its foreign and security policy (including domestic aspects) to elites who operate behind closed doors. While these people share the population's disdain for foreigners, especially powerful ones, they are used to dealing with us, and have a fairly reliable "the devil you know..." attitude. For those who actually know America well, including many of the top MFA people, FM Davutoglu, President Gul, and some of the Generals, this pragmatic attitude is reinforced by real

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affection. Most elite Turks, for example, genuinely appear to prefer interpersonal relations with sometimes blunt but usually honest Americans to waffling European colleagues. Moreover, Turks when making poll survey decisions might well be mentally operating in a different context than when they are making, for example, personal taste or purchase decisions. Otherwise, the strong references to, and claimed endorsements of, "American" standards or institutions in selling products -- or in seeking educational opportunities -- would presumably not be so ubiquitous.

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